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ABSTRACT

Noting that the lower performance of low-income children on false belief tasks in comparison to that of middle-income children has not been adequately explained, this study examined the possibility that black children's experiences and talents with storytelling may facilitate their performance on false belief tasks when narrative questions are used. Participating in the study were 36 black and 36 white low-income preschool children (average age 53 months). The children were given two types of false belief (FB) tasks, standard and narrative FB tasks. It was hypothesized that black children would perform better than white children on narrative FB tasks and that black children would perform better on narrative questions than they would on standard questions. Results indicated that black children's scores on the standard and narrative questions were equivalent, but that white children's narrative FB scores were significantly lower than their standard FB scores. Overall, black children had higher scores than white children on narrative questions. Black children's cultural experience with storytelling is cited as a possible reason for their performance on FB tasks. (Contains 14 references.) (KB)

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Black Preschoolers' Social Cognition: Storytelling and False Belief

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Paper presented at the 108th Convention of the
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ABSTRACT

Low-income preschoolers (36 Black, 36 White) were given two types of false belief (FB) tasks, Standard and Narrative FB tasks. Black children's scores on the Standard and Narrative questions were equivalent, but White children's Narrative FB scores were significantly lower than their Standard FB scores. Overall, Black children had higher scores than White children on Narrative questions. These findings are explained by ethnographic research emphasizing Black children's strength and talent with storytelling.

BACKGROUND

The false belief (FB) task tests whether children understand that people act according to their beliefs (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Low-income children are less likely to pass FB tasks than middle-income children are (Cole & Mitchell, 1998; Holmes, Black, & Miller, 1996; Hughes & Dunn, 1998). This finding has either not been explained (Holmes, Black, & Miller, 1996; Hughes & Dunn, 1998) or has been explained by authoritarian parenting styles which provide children with little insight into other's mental states (Cole & Mitchell, 1998). None of the researchers discussed cultural practices that may help or hinder children's grasp of mental states, even though both Holmes et al. (1996) and Hughes and Dunn (1998) had adequate numbers of Black children in their samples. One cultural practice that may aid Black children's understanding of mental states is storytelling. Ethnographic research recognizes storytelling as a valued and common part of Black culture (Heath, 1982). Thus, Black children's experience with stories may help them pass FB questions that are embedded in narratives.

Hypotheses

- Black children are expected to perform better than White children on narrative FB questions.
- Black children are expected to perform better on narrative questions than they do on standard questions.

METHOD

Participants. See Table 1 for a description of the participants.

Materials & Procedure. Experimenters told children scenarios about puppets and asked them 3 Standard FB questions along with memory questions. Also experimenters told children a story using a wordless picture book (Mayer, 1969) and asked them 3 Narrative FB questions along with memory questions. Children received a correct score only if they answered both the test and the memory question correctly. Table 2 lists the specific questions.

Children were also given the language and cognition subscale of the Early Screening Inventory—Revised (ESI-R; Meisels, Marsden, Wiske, Stone, & Henderson, 1997).

RESULTS

A Race x Age MANCOVA with language scores as the covariate was conducted. Language scores were used as a covariate because prior research indicates a relationship between language ability and FB performance (Astington & Jenkins, 1999). Results revealed a significant difference between Black (M = 1.00) and White (M = .44) children's performance on the Narrative questions, F

(1, 71) = 6.18, $p < .05$. However, there was no significant difference between the groups on the Standard questions. Paired samples t-tests revealed that Black children's scores on the Narrative and Standard questions were equivalent, but White children's scores on Narrative questions (M = .44) were lower than their Standard question scores (M = 1.33), t (35) = - 4.23, p =. 00.

CONCLUSIONS

Black children's performance could be due to their cultural experience with storytelling. From the time Black children are babies they are surrounded by stories and encouraged to tell them (Heath, 1982). Their stories tend to be imaginative (Vernon-Feagans, 1996) and revolve around social relationships (Sperry & Sperry, 1995). Therefore, when Black children were asked about the character's beliefs, this was not difficult for them because they may be accustomed to hearing detailed stories about people's actions and making inferences about their mental states. Perhaps Black children have a talent for narrative comprehension. If so, this talent could be incorporated into the classroom.

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Table 1. Demographics of Participants

	Black (n = 36)	White (n = 36)
Age	53 months (SD = 8.35)	53 months (SD = 9.23)
Enrolled Head Start	15	18
Enrolled non-Head Start	21	18
Sex	20 girls, 16 boys	20 girls, 16 boys
Language Score	7.44 (SD = 2.88)	8.36 (SD = 2.65)

Table 2. Questions

STANDARD QUESTIONS	NARRATIVE QUESTIONS
Where will Pam look first for a Band-Aid? *Will she find Band-Aids there?*	**When Robert first looked in the hole, who did he think might be there, his frog or a mole?** *Who was really there, his frog or a mole?*
When Debbie first sees this, what will she think this is, a candle or an apple? *What is this really and truly, a candle or an apple?*	**When Robert first looked inside the hollow, who did he think might be there, an owl or his frog?** *Who was really there, an owl or his* frog?
Where will Mark look first for his book? *Will he find his book there?*	**When Robert was leaning on the long, skinny black things what did he think they were, tree branches or antlers?** *What were they really and truly, tree branches or antlers?*

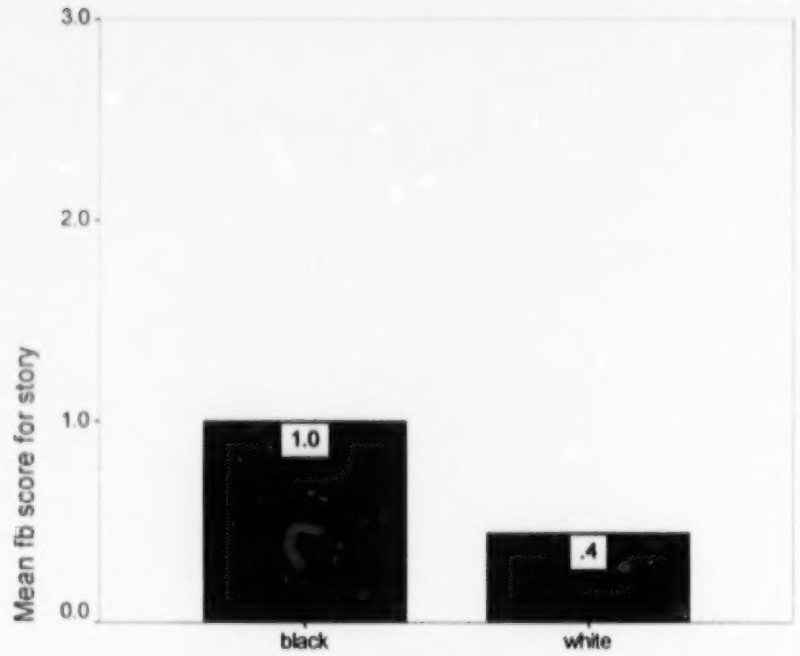

Figure 1. Narrative Score by Race

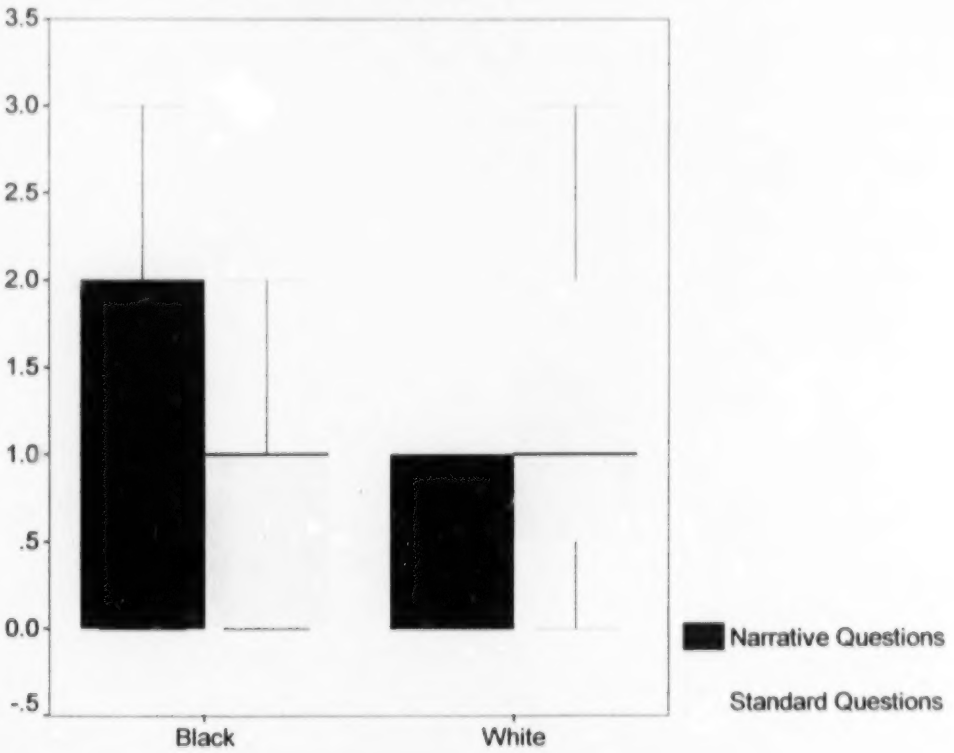

Figure 2. Comparison of Black and White children's scores by Question type